

Barrow Urges Bush to Strengthen Pressure on the Sudanese Government & Encourage Greater Access for Humanitarian Aid in Darfur

Washington, DC – 12th District Georgia Congressman John Barrow (D-Savannah) today joined a bipartisan group of Congressional leaders from the House and Senate urging President Bush to strengthen international pressure on the Sudanese government to cooperate in ongoing humanitarian relief efforts across Darfur.

“We urge you to deliver a clear and forceful message to the Sudanese government that the United States and the international community expect Sudan to follow through on all of its agreements,” Barrow and Congressional leaders wrote in a letter to President Bush. “While we welcomed the signing on March 28 of the Joint Communiqué between the government of Sudan and the UN on the facilitation of humanitarian activities in Darfur, we are worried that the government’s promise to ‘support, protect and facilitate humanitarian operations in Darfur’ will not be effectively fulfilled or enforced.”

During the past four years, civil unrest and regional political disputes in Sudan have boiled over into bloodshed and genocide – resulting in an estimated 450,000 deaths in the Darfur region. In addition, another 2.5 million civilians from the region have been forced to flee their homes and have sought refuge in “internally displaced persons” camps.

President Bush and other international leaders have publicly denounced the actions of the Sudanese government and its allied Janjaweed militias, supporting diplomatic decrees for the Sudanese government to reject the violence in Darfur and disarm the militias. So far, definitive agreement to stop the violence has not yet been reached.

Last month, Congressman Barrow traveled to the Darfur region of Sudan as part of an official bipartisan Congressional delegation to meet with regional leaders and study the ongoing situation. During three days spent in Darfur, Barrow and members of the delegation discussed the ongoing genocide in the region with the President of Southern Sudan Salva Kiir, along with other Ministers from the Government of Southern Sudan. Barrow also met with the Speaker of Parliament from the Southern Sudan Legislative Assembly, James Wani, and received briefings by non-governmental organizations carrying out humanitarian work in the South and Darfur, rebel leader and Darfur Peace Agreement-signatory Minni Minawi, and African Union Ambassador to Sudan Sam Ibok.

While in the North Darfur city of El Fasher, Barrow visited the El Salaam Internally Displaced Persons Camp, and met with the African Union Mission in Sudan (AMIS) Force Commander, Major General Luke Aprezi, at AMIS Headquarters. Barrow and the delegation also met with U.N. officials working on the ground in Darfur, including the UN Mission in Sudan, and the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

“While there are many global priorities for the U.S. right now, we can’t afford to turn a blind eye to the continuing genocide in Darfur,” Barrow said. “The bloodshed that’s taken place in the region is unbelievable, but the humanitarian response is awesome. I’m hopeful that the U.S. can work together with our international allies to stop the bloodshed once and for all, and help get aid to the people in need.”

Full text of today’s letter to President Bush:

May 4, 2007

Mr. George W. Bush

The President

The White House

Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to you as members of Congress who are deeply concerned about humanitarian workers' access to millions of Darfurians whose lives depend on international assistance for food, health care, and other emergency services. As you are certainly aware, increasing attacks on aid workers and supplies as well as rising insecurity have already forced relief agencies to scale back their operations in a number of areas. Equally troublesome impediments to effective delivery of this desperately needed assistance, however, are created by the Sudanese government.

While we welcomed the signing on March 28 of the Joint Communiqué between the government of Sudan and the UN on the facilitation of humanitarian activities in Darfur, we are worried that the government's promise to "support, protect and facilitate humanitarian operations in Darfur" will not be effectively fulfilled or enforced.

Based on credible reports from a number of humanitarian organizations, both U.S.-based and international, it is clear that these groups continued to experience problems even after the Communiqué was signed. For example, aid workers have endured major delays in receiving travel visas and work permits, which significantly inhibits their ability to provide assistance in Darfur. Even after receiving short-term visas and permits, paperwork renewal is time-consuming and quite expensive, with the Sudanese Government charging fees in excess of US\$360 per person.

Last month's Communiqué specifically stated that:

- All visas and work permits would be extended;
- Applications for new visas and permits would be approved within 15 days; and
- Exit and re-entry visas would be granted within two days of application.

Unfortunately, with the exception of granting a few exit visas, the Sudanese Humanitarian Affairs Commission (HAC) continues to block these necessary papers. In addition, some humanitarian workers who recently left Sudan for a short-term period have received a stamp in their passport that says: "Cannot work in Darfur for six months." This represents a clear violation of both the spirit and the letter of the 48-hour turn-around requirement on re-entry visas detailed in the Communiqué.

Additionally, aid agencies have reported that while some Sudanese government agencies have accepted these less restrictive procedures, others have not. This discrepancy creates significant confusion and delays. For example, the Customs Department and the Ministry of Finance often refuse to issue exemptions for imported materials to humanitarian groups, even after full authorization has been obtained from the HAC. These problems suggest that despite the government's promise to reduce bureaucratic impediments, this commitment is not being well communicated or executed across all government agencies.

Finally, we are concerned by reports that the Sudanese Department of Labor has attempted to interfere in humanitarian groups' hiring processes, by refusing work permits and citing qualification requirements without producing any legitimate explanation when an application has been rejected. The Communiqué clearly states that, with the exception of practicing engineers and medical professionals: "[international NGOs] will recruit and deploy international staff according only to the selection criteria stipulated by individual organizations." Similarly, humanitarian field workers and technical staff who perform specialized job functions -- including safety, protection, policy and IDP camp coordination -- have experienced significantly more delays and impediments than other workers. This suggests that the government of Sudan may be selectively applying procedures to certain categories of workers - yet another practice that contradicts the goals of the recently agreed Joint Communiqué.

We urge you to deliver a clear and forceful message to the Sudanese government that the United States and the international community expect Sudan to follow through on all of its agreements, including the recent Joint Communiqué that deals with bureaucratic impediments to humanitarian access. In dealing with the Sudanese government, we implore

you to use all possible tools of leverage at your disposal to ensure that all relief agencies and workers are treated equally, and that these humanitarian workers are able to access the more than two million Darfuris who are dependent on them for survival.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. We look forward to your prompt response on this urgent matter.

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